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RADIOHEAD

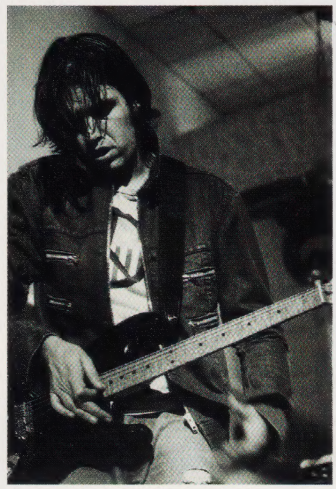
ALARMS AND SURPRISES

With the albums KID A and AMNESIAC, RADIOHEAD achieved the seemingly impossible and brought uncompromisingly experimental music to the arena-going masses. However, their latest, HAIL TO THE THIEF, is their most accessible work in years. Over the next 12 pages, NEIL KULKARNI loses faith and finds redemption on tour, THOM YORKE and COLIN GREENWOOD trace the band's musical journey and STANLEY DONWOOD, long-standing co-conspirator and sleeve artist, explains his modus operandi.

LIVE PICTURES BY AMI BARWELL
PORTRAITS BY NITIN VADUKUL/IDOLS

THOM YORKE

Is this the place to be? What am I doing here? I'm backstage at the ambitiously-titled after-show 'party' thrown by Radiohead following their gig at Edinburgh's Corn Exchange. Lights so low you have to squint to see the person you're speaking to, various people of varying degrees of import all sharing that same smug expression that says 'Hey, look where we are! See how far we've come!'. A few bottles of beer which the BANG wrecking crew consider beneath us. A few bottles of what looks like dead classy wine, pointlessly placed near stacks of paper cups. I steal photographer Ami a bottle of white. She nicks me a bottle of red. And we sit back, swigging posh plonk and watch and wonder who the fuck these people are, wondering when after-show parties became a byword for so much meet'n'greet embarrassment, such a falteringly polite soirée that feels like it's winding down before it's started. And inevitably all you can hear is the sound of backs being slapped: there's incredibly nice bassist Colin Greenwood saying that 'This tour is going brilliantly, we're trying to change the set every night to keep ourselves interested'.



There's guitarist (and Colin's bro) Jonny. There's Thom Yorke, who you see for all of three seconds as he walks in and seems to disappear through the wall. The feeling that we should be joining hands around a table and calling for answers from the infinite is confirmed by the fact that everyone here seems to be a ghost of a person: people whose eyes you can't find, all mouthing ectoplasmic platitudes about how great tonight was, how unbelievable the gig was, how great everyone is, and BANG are sat here getting sneered at for not wiping our lips or holding paper cups, and for holding the following heresy close to our hearts which is presumably unmistakable in our eyes.

Radiohead were shit tonight.

It was a crap gig.

We're bored.

Can't say it out loud. 'Cos there was a time when I would've punched myself in the face for even saying it to myself. I was a believer who couldn't get close to these gods. Right now I'm a matter of feet away from them and I can't tell them how close they've come to shattering my faith tonight. For a band so critical of government they've made me feel like a dissatisfied voter: plenty to say but with a gnawing sense that no one in this colossal structure would care. They've got one more chance to keep this sheep in the flock. I want them to care again.

> "WHAT RADIOHEAD HAVE DONE IS NOTHING LESS THAN REINVOKE THE POST-ROCK PROJECT AND MADE IT SELL MILLIONS"

'Cos I didn't get that tonight. I got a full sense of all the reasons Radiohead should be playing, but nary a shred of feeling that they were here because they wanted to be. Nothing seems to animate them in Edinburgh except the idea of fulfilling obligations, showing their faces to please the punters. It's that fatal downward look on the existential tightrope, that queasy unease you get about whether Radiohead have a reason to *be* any more that characterises their set in Edinburgh. You get the feeling they're here because they've sold tickets. The Corn Exchange (a terrible flat-pack, abattoir-style, ambience-bereft oblong-box hall that would probably conspire to suck the vibe out of the Second Coming) is heaving with Radiohead listeners. Here to listen.

A curiously uninvolved audience. You sense admiration but no affection, assent and agreement but no fundamental conviction or lunatic devotion. You walk in and you can't believe you're about to see one of the biggest bands in the world in such intimate space, so close, on the level and clear in front of you, but it'd seem you're the only one getting truly antsed in the pants. Near-religious mania only descends on one girl, whose head hits the floor to our left with a sickening thud as her eyes roll back in her head and the glossolalia starts spilling out. We leap to action: I issue ineffectual orders with my hands on my ears, and Ami lifts the girl's head out of the beer-slick at the bar. And you consider how odd this all is: Radiohead play to stadia in the US, are the official 'UK Band It's OK To Like' according to pretty much every nu-metal band in existence (and if that hasn't put you off in recent years then I guess I'm the elitist twat with problems), and have come to the world with a new album, *Hail To The Thief*, that's their most accessible in years. And yet, they're playing these normal-sized venues in an apparent gesture to the fans, coming on stage promptly at 8.30 with no support, playing for upwards of an hour and a half. It's weird not knowing what to call this. Doesn't feel like a gig. Or a fanclub gig. More like a showcase, an invitation to come check out the stars before they disappear into the realms of places you can't afford, places where you'll have to strain to see the stick men in the distance for your 50-odd-quid. And *nice* though it all is, it seems an act of charity, a well-intentioned yet ultimately devoid-of-drama way of diffusing precisely the very sense of anticipation and tension that any band's return should hold.

It's a distinct feeling of anti-climax cemented when Radiohead walk on stage. The set's a mess, casually conceived and frantically executed, battling against an audience who've seemingly forgotten what going to gigs entails – erm, dance? Sing? Enjoy yourself? Nah, just gawp at the big machinery and 'appreciate' – in a room that diffuses the sound into mud and the atmosphere into the walls. The precise gripe that you swore wouldn't bother you before they come on starts to nag at you. *Where are the hits?* Why all this shit offa *Kid A* and *Amnesiac* and the new one no one really knows? Why only one song off *The Bends* and two offa *OK Computer*? Why pull people out of their homes for two dozen squid to watch *musicians*? It's all over far too slowly. The highlights (a stunning 'Pyramid Song', a blazing 'Go To Sleep') are

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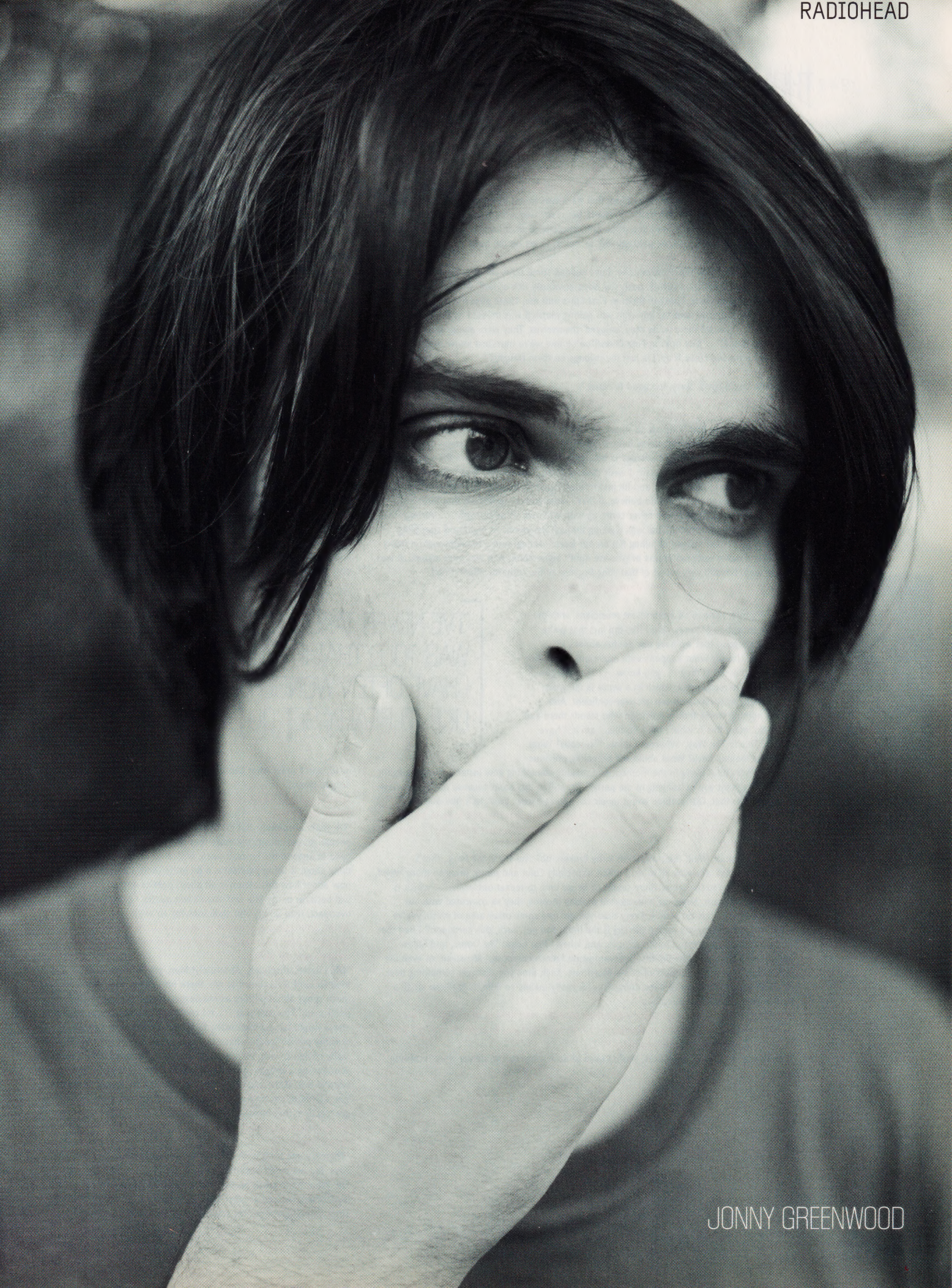

JONNY GREENWOOD

THOM YORKE

ON HAIL TO THE THIEF

Tell me about 'A Wolf At The Door', the most beautiful track on the new album. I played it on the train from Bath to Oxford, with the scenery drifting by . . . perfect.

"Really? Do you know how close that track was to not being on the record? It's odd that you mention the train from Bath, because I wrote the lyric on that very same train. I got on the train one night, and, because of what I do . . . well . . . if I want some peace and quiet . . . I, er, paid my full, er, ticket, to get up the front . . ."

Are you trying to say you travelled First Class?

"[Laughs] Yeah, it's criminally expensive, but I needed some time, some peace and quiet. But what I got was a bunch of rowdy, posh city boys, obviously rich as hell, who were going to some fucking stag party. Thirty of them in First Class and me. These guys had two crates of Stella, a ghetto blaster, and the guy who was getting married was dressed as Elvis. And for three hours, I just sat there while they 'enjoyed' themselves. They were awful, aaaargh... and the whole lyric [". . . City boys in First Class/Don't know we're born/Just know someone else is gonna come and clean it up"] is just my revenge on them [laughs]."

Can accomplished musicianship sometimes get in the way of composing?

"Not with us [laughs]. Sorry, too good to resist."

I meant, were there moments when you thought, 'A more accomplished player would never have approached this song this way'?

"I have Jonny to do that. Jonny is so smart, so amazing, technically . . . I've never met a musician like him: everything Jonny does is totally on intuition, but at the same time he's so knowledgeable. My musical knowledge is incredibly limited. To this day, I'm the only one in Radiohead who doesn't read music. I went through this phase where I was trying to get him to teach me how to read music, and he just refused [laughs]. He said: 'No way, man, you're staying the ignorant one.' But I do believe, if that's what you're suggesting, that technically-accomplished musicians would never come up with what we come up with . . . 'Airbag': that was totally done on instinct. That was walking through the woods at night and stumbling upon this great idea instead of falling flat on our faces. 'Airbag' was a breakthrough in many ways. We'd never sampled drums before. We didn't argue about it. It was very organic. It was a huge leap. I'm still very proud of that song because of the cathartic effect it had."

I'm a bit surprised that you'd talk disparagingly about your musical capabilities . . .

"Well, it's true, none of us are brilliant musicians, with the possible exception of Jonny. And I like the fact that we're not. And it's good that we have our doubts about . . . everything. Usually what happens with musicians when they become successful is they . . . you know . . . they start to believe they're really good, which in a sense is the worst thing for any musician. You can get over-confident. And there's nothing worse than a musician who stands there and goes, 'No, man, this is what I do. I do this. I am it. I have arrived. This is *The Way*.' Whereas I think, 'Oh really? What about not looking back? What about not repeating previous efforts? What about living in the moment and making something new instead of relying again on that thing that you're bringing to the party?' I'm still in this band because none of us have ever been like that. Our attitude about music is: 'I don't know'. Well, let's find out."

> "I'VE NEVER TAKEN ACID... CHIEFLY BECAUSE I WAS TOLD THAT IF I DID, I'D NEVER COME BACK. I HAVE OFTEN WONDERED WHAT IT WOULD BE LIKE TO REALLY GET OUT THERE"

On *Kid A* and *Amnesiac* you seemed to want to prove that a song doesn't have to be three minutes long; it doesn't have to have a chorus; it doesn't have to be a singalong . . . stop biting your nails!

"Right, sorry mum. Well, rules are there to be broken, no? The sky is the limit. That's chemistry, I guess. The way all of us, I mean, especially Colin and Jonny, bring so many weird, interesting things to the table. There seems to be no time to repeat ourselves . . . which is good. Also, we learn. Since we have started making records, they've coincided with our discovery of new musical genres. Every time you get into some other area of music you've never been in before, you realise the sky is the limit. You go, 'Fuck, this exists too!' I had that when I started listening to Charles Mingus, and when I first heard The Doors, and Miles Davis, and R.E.M., and The Smiths, or [avant-garde French composer] Messiaen, or even the supposedly cheesy soundtracks of Ennio Morricone. Each time you discover something new, you realise that what you've been doing thus far really means so little, is really so small a portion of all possible musics."

Radiohead must all be on the same wavelength to make your kind of music; what's the oddest, most cryptic reference to developing a new song that you have made, and did Colin, Phil, Jonny and Ed know what you meant?

"I do that a lot. Cryptic references, yeah. I used to do it more still while we were recording *Kid A* and *Amnesiac*. I said things like, 'This has to sound like what you hear in a forest at night, after rainfall,' or something along those lines. And they would go [serious expression] 'Right!' and then take the piss behind my back [laughs]. I talked so much shit when we were doing those records . . . what tended to happen is that the others saw or heard certain phrases in my lyrics, and that changed what they were doing. Certain words or expressions made them choose different sounds. What tends to happen, too, is by the time it comes to rehearsing new songs, a lot of the time I haven't sorted out the lyrics yet, so I'm working on those as we play music, so the two feed off on each other . . . or fight against each other. I can't recall the specific song where I've told them 'This needs to sound brown', but I'm sure I've said that at one point. I can't explain the in-joke, because I'll get into trouble, but there's someone we know in the music business who usually walks into the studio and says 'This track doesn't sound brown enough,' and then leaves and gets paid for that."

There's this guy called Nigel . . .

"No, I'm not talking about Nigel Godrich. We're lucky to have him."

You make beautiful, adventurous, mind-expanding music without, as far as I know, taking mind expanding substances. Which proves you don't need crutches of that kind to be truly creative.

"Well . . . I've never taken acid, for instance. Chiefly because I was told that if I did, I'd never come back. I have often wondered what it would be like to really get out there. But I . . . I don't trust I'd ever come back. That's been my thing, really . . . I have enough trouble with my dreams, so it would probably not be a good idea. Also I think anyone who, like me, is prone to depression, should not go near drugs. Because drugs perpetuate whatever's going on in your head, and I suffer from depression and that's actually a pretty strong drug in itself."

Lyrically, do you tend to get people over-analysing something you did purely on instinct?

"Oh yeah, absolutely. But that's cool. My experience is that, the more people get our music, the more they feel it, the less they feel the need to analyse the lyrics. I mean, with *Hail To The Thief*, the whole thing about it being political is a bit far-fetched. I keep reading stuff now about how this album is all about politics and anti-America . . . just because of the title and one or two quotes I gave. People overreact, read things into stuff, look for an angle . . ."

To me, your music is something pure and emotional, and politics is something ugly, and when you mix the two, the ugliness tends to contaminate the purity . . .

"Oh, I agree, absolutely. Absolutely! Man, you have no idea . . . I tried so hard. This record to me, these new songs, they're not so much songs about politics as me desperately struggling to keep politics out. The past year . . . If I could have written about anything else, I would have. I tried really fucking hard. But how can any sensible person ignore what's been going on altogether? I couldn't, I really couldn't. Fuck, man, I would love to write lyrics free of politics! Send me on a retreat somewhere, where I can get it out of my system! But, at the end of the day, anyone can enjoy any of the new songs without having a clue what they're about. What matters is that gut reaction; that initial emotive response."

We're in Oxford. I heard you used to crash parties here in your student days.

"There's some truth in that. I was a leper for a while, in my student days. But we didn't organise anything major . . . it was just a bit of fun. We used to crash parties and raid the DJ booth and put on our Joy Division records or other fairly depressing stuff. It was brilliant. They weren't great parties anyway . . . is my excuse [laughs]."

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COLIN GREENWOOD

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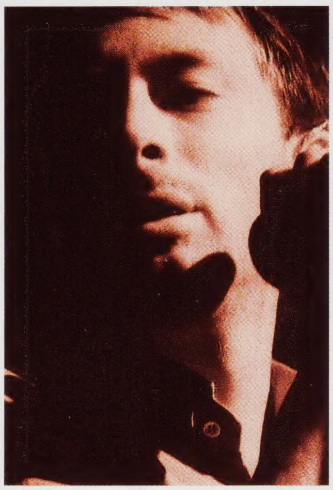
outweighed by too many songs (a disappointing 'Lucky' and 'My Iron Lung' and a half-arsed 'Karma Police') where Radiohead seem determined to make the new stuff sound better by playing the old stuff with lackadaisical indifference. And you return home with nearly all the love in your blood diluted and destroyed by the sheer mediocrity of tonight's performance, the way they tried so damned hard to leave every synapse untouched. And when you get to your hotel room you dig out the back catalogue and turn the lights off and get reminded of why you're here.



'Cos sheeyit, these five guys used to make my soul reel from the accuracy. Still do, when I can be arsed to let some extra wreckage into my life. But where Radiohead used to convince you they had a reason to be (*Pablo Honey*, *The Bends* and *OK Computer* are an index in how to stay in touch with the infinite complexity and contradiction of creative expression even as the confines come in all around), as they've got musically more interesting their motivation seems to have slipped. The total freedom that characterised *Kid A* and *Amnesiac* has evaporated the heat and pressure and humanity from Radiohead's sound, their grasp on your life and time loosening to a distant wave from their own perfectly malformed universe. A fatal loss in terms of anyone wanting to live with their records, a gain in terms of giving their sound the range and reach they've agitated for their whole career (even 'Creep' sounded spaced and planet-sized-horny in amidst the schmindie insularity it competed with at the time). *Hail To The Thief* makes me give a shit again like *Kid A* and its follow-up didn't. A band finally confident enough to let us hear them plug in and play, a band gratifyingly unprecious enough about their own talent to start enforcing a brutal conciseness on their songs, clip things down, focus on the clear communication of their chaos. Like all Radiohead records, it's honest about its own confusion, and it's a record smart enough to capture a vibe of darkening, disturbing times for the world without becoming an issue-dependent gripe list. But throughout the Edinburgh gig the words that keep coming to your lips are 'they don't *need* to do this anymore'. Probably true, financially and promotionally. But a thought that no band (a band is not the same as a group of musicians) should give you from a stage. I was genuinely upset in Edinburgh. Maybe tonight's performance at the Manchester Apollo will save me and them.

> "TOTALLY ABSORBING AND TOTAL SHOWMANSHIP (THOUGH HE POSSIBLY WOULDN'T ADMIT THE LATTER)"

It's 8pm and already the vibe's better. You sense the audience are disciples willing to ascend to heaven or curse their false gods depending on how Radiohead throw down their gospel tonight. Every new slab of ska that comes from the PA gets a boo 'cos it holds off the 'Head's arrival. And then, pitch darkness, a skittering of beats and a revealing moment. Thom Yorke walking centre stage, going past his place and finding the edge in the footlights, in the centre of a whirlwind of noise raining down from bleachers to bull pit. He just stands there for a hilarious hanging minute, as confronted by us as we are by him, a chap you'd ignore in the street grinning from ear to ear at the absurdity of the adulation he can command, the way a rock god can apparently just stand like he's at a Safeway's checkout waiting for his onions to be lasered. And he knows it's funny. And that's crucial – he enjoys it on its own merits, where before you sense he'd have scowled at the misguided idolisation and retreated into the darkness of muso anonymity. Signs of a band rediscovering their funny bone and their heart. And the rest of the performance is one of the most generous, startling, moving two hours I've ever spent in the company of a band. Nothing short of redemption.

Too easy and too heartless to say it's just down to the better sound. But as soon as 'There There' kicks in, there's a richness that wasn't there before, a propulsive lunge to Colin Greenwood's bass that can be almost too engrossing, so hurriedly do you have to rush back from his fretboard to figure out what the fuck everyone else is doing, Phil Selway's drums funky as fuck and filled with instinctive simplicity, Ed O'Brien and Jonny strapping on and getting filthy on '2+2=5' with every derailed idea intact, forceful, direct. And simply put, Thom sounds like he believes in what he's doing. I haven't heard him so thoroughly and unapologetically detail his heart and soul since that unforgettable night at Glastonbury all those years ago. Now, at last, unashamed of his voice and letting it soar free, plummet from cosmos to close-up in a syllable: 'National Anthem' and 'Myxomatosis' sounding HUGE but always skewered by his all-too human throat, so you can't just sit back and admire the chrome, you have to go with his slipstream, go on the same emotional journey it's clear his straining frame and occasionally spazzed-out body is on. Totally absorbing AND total showmanship (though he possibly wouldn't admit the latter). Ed's backing vocals are a revelation – turning so many harmonies into so much Bowie-esque drama and pure-pop pizzazz. Most stunning is just how incredible the new songs sound, just what curious avenues Radiohead are opening up, what weird anti-lineages they're tapping into. On various nu-choonage (they play seven from *Hail To The Thief*, and just as many from *Kid A* and *Amnesiac*) they sound like The Raincoats, ESG, Roxy Music, The Durutti Column, The Fall, Aspera and none of the above – always the uniqueness of their vision shining through, something way more than mere 'innovation' going on, way more than middle-class prettiness, something more like auto-surgery on their own frenzied imagination with no wastage, no pointless noodling, never a second that doesn't need to be there.

Even when they do songs that you sense no other band would dare to put in a set (the bust-up, Weill-style funeral march of 'We Suck Young Blood') you sense it's not just to be perverse, not just to fuck with the

RADIOHEAD
ED O'BRIEN

conventions of what a gig should be all about. They're playing these songs 'cos they love them, 'cos they honestly think they're the best songs they've got, and they want to share.

It's only when you suddenly snap back from your immersion in 'The Gloaming' and 'Idioteque' that you realise that what Radiohead have done is nothing less than reinvoke the post-rock project and make it sell millions – this is like some dream mash-up of Disco Inferno, Bark Psychosis, Moonshake, Laika and the whole God/Ice/Techno-Animal axis somehow being played in a massive theatre in Manchester and getting rapturous applause the weirder it gets.

No mean feat, but what really secures this gig in the memory is how much damn fun they seem to be having. Yorke swaps gags with the crowd, about clapping along, about his band's strangeness, about the possibilities of doing an Iron Maiden cover.

There's a great moment as they fade out on some gorgeous dubbed-out vocals, the machines slowly taking over while Thom sits stage right, looking at us and laughing and then looking at the band and nodding – alternating the two as if to say 'Jesus Christ, ain't this dandy?'. Unbelievably, it's the childish sense of joy and naivety (never words you'd associate with Radiohead) that comes through, a playfulness as unexpected as it is unable to contain itself.

So when they do dive back into the past, you don't feel like they're rolling up their sleeves and inwardly groaning. 'Fake Plastic Trees' is still incredible – the audience dropping its singalong in sheer trembling tension at Yorke's unmannered subtlety, the precarious way he holds Radiohead together, the way he can reinvigorate material you'd think would be tiresome simply by letting the songs live again, exist in that same believable space they occupied when you first heard them. 'Just' and 'My Iron Lung' could sound lumpen in amongst Radiohead's new tricks but they play each at full-tilt, rocking like bastards, pummelling the songs into renewed life. They depart their second encore with a crowd finally taking the breath they've waited two hours to heave and a look of awe passing between us participants (not mere spectators, and that was half the difference tonight). The look of mutual recognition that comes with the knowledge we've been witness to something special. And you realise you can now look everyone in the eye, 'cos you all know what's real.

Radiohead were brilliant tonight.

It was an unforgettable gig.

We're in love again. B

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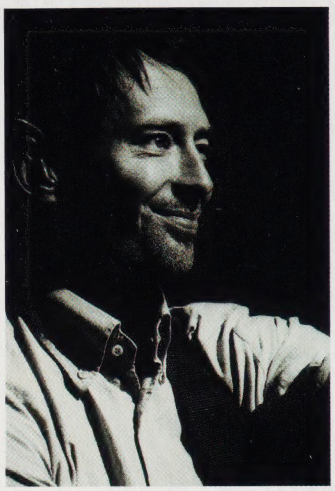


COLIN GREENWOOD
ON HAIL TO THE THIEF

Be honest: is this another difficult Radiohead album?

"I hope not. A lot of journalists we've spoken with say that it's our easiest one to embrace immediately. Our hope, in terms of the nature of any Radiohead record, is that there will be enough diversity of sounds that will affect different people in different ways. Our goal is always to make a record that people will listen to over a long period of time."

What makes *Hail To The Thief* easier to embrace?

"Well, the first song, "2+2=5", is three and a half minutes long, it's got three strong melodies in it and loud guitar halfway through, a few long choruses and guitar solos – I mean, isn't that what everyone's been saying they wanted from us in the last three years?"

Is that what you tried to deliver?

"By no means – but it is what we delivered. I think that this record's definitely more straightforward than the previous two, though."

What made the difference?

"Eighty per cent of this record is all of us in a room playing together, and recorded in one take, apart from 'Sit Down. Stand Up' (where it's only the middle bit – the rest is live) and 'Backdrifts' and 'The Gloaming,' but all of the rest is live. It could've been recorded in the 1950s."

Wasn't a lot of it fleshed-out in concert performances before the recording sessions?

"This record is the first since *OK Computer* that came right off the back of playing shows. For that one, we'd been touring with Alanis Morissette when we wrote a lot of that material. For this one, it started coming together right after we did the compilation of live songs for the 'I Might Be Wrong' single. The idea was to capture these songs new as they were emerging, and as we were arranging and developing them in front of live audiences. And the goal was to preserve the energy."

How does that compare to the recording process for *Kid A* and *Amnesiac*?

"We wrote, arranged, recorded everything in the studio, for both of those records. We didn't get much daylight or fresh air. Could you tell? I guess you could say that on those records, the door to the outside world was ajar; now it's open."

I find it hard to believe that *Hail To The Thief* was recorded live, it sounds so deep and textured.

"Well, that's all [producer] Nigel Godrich's magic, isn't it? It's got nothing to do with us."

Your album title is a direct reference to the controversial Bush election of 2000. Do Radiohead have a position on his presidency?

"We don't have a collective position on Bush because we're not a collective band – we are a unified group, but we are all strongly individual within that group. Following on from that, it is wrong to take the title of the album as being strictly and only a reflection on the Bush presidency. It's about a lot of other things, too."

Such as?

"Well, this album was leaked to the internet. There are obvious connections there."

What was your reaction when you learned about the tracks leaking?

"I was crushed that those early, unfinished mixes went up on the net. It has nothing to do with the money – it was like we'd been burglarised when we'd gone out to get some more paint."

And did you say there was a third meaning to the album title?

"Yes. The album cover is a map of Hollywood with a number of different terms written over different city blocks, and the overall effect is designed to play up and point out the dynamics and danger of consumerism."

In concert, Thom has introduced 'We Suck Young Blood' as being a song about Hollywood.

"For him, I'm sure that's the case. As a place, Hollywood, it's good to work there, not live. And I think it's quite difficult if you're not busy there – I suspect you'd go mad, really, you'd go to pieces quite quickly."

And don't get me started on the driving!

"You know, when we were recording in LA, we drove ourselves around; we rented a fleet of the new Minis, actually! I'm sure we came across as a bit of an Austin Powers movie, driving around in this convoy. They are, of course, made in Oxford, so we felt it was our duty to rent them in America. We felt kind of like the musical wing of the British embassy, promoting British products abroad. Then again, the Minis are owned by Germany now, so I guess we're not very good ambassadors after all."

Apparently you're the band member who lives to play live.

"I love the idea of our concerts being the backdrop to somebody's Saturday night; you get together with some friends, have some beers, get the picnic rug out and listen to your favourite band playing down in the hollow. Or the theatre, I guess! But basically, somewhere up close and personal where you can be near the band.

Aren't arena tours inevitable?

"Well, perhaps, though for the last five years since *OK Computer*, we decided consciously not to do that, and for the most part, we've been able to stick to that decision. I know that we did play the Air Canada Centre [in Toronto] for *Amnesiac*, but it was the small, roped-off part, not the whole stadium and I remember being fantastically happy with the sound in that show. Of course, yes, there were all of those overwhelming, brilliant (as in bright) signs everywhere – which is why we dedicated a song to corporate advertising."

Of course, Radiohead are big fans of Naomi Klein's anti-corporate book, *No Logo*; Thom in particular.

"Yes, I've read it, and it is a very good book, a very persuasive book; but I'm not what you'd call one of the more zealous members of the band when it comes to that. Corporate advertising doesn't ruin my day or piss me off tremendously. In fact, what would piss me off is if a lot of people who wanted to see us play couldn't because we turned down a gig based on its sponsorship affiliations. That would be plain dumb, and Thom would agree with that."

What's the general Radiohead mood? Is Thom happier?

"Everyone is, yeah. And Thom's not as moribund as his lyrics make everyone think. I always say that Thom's lyrics only show a part of his personality; maybe the dark part, sure, but the point is that there's more to him. He doesn't cry himself to sleep every night!

You've described *Kid A* as a recorded message and *Amnesiac* as a conversation. What is *Hail To The Thief*?

"*Kid A* was an email or a message on an answering machine; it was distant. *Amnesiac* was a direct conversation; very human. *Hail To The Thief* is a concert, isn't it? Or maybe it's a group therapy session?"

PHIL SELWAY

REPTILE GOOD COP BAD COP
FOREVER ASYLUM
DREAMER SCREAM SANDBAG
RIGHTS GAGGING ORDER CAPITALISM
DUPE HYSTERIA VOUCHERS
PICKPOCKETS SCUM KING
SHAREHOLDERS
PILGRIM DECAY
HOSPITAL WORM MAYHEM
ATTENTION
CARE DUPED BOGEYMAN SYMPATHY
JERK MONEY YELLOW
MAYHEM RAT SMILE
LAPDOG CONCRETE FAULT IDIOTIC
COVER GULLIBLE
TRACK LURID PAYING STRANGERS JITTERS BLIZZARD
THIEF USELESS ASYLUM SHARE OPTIONS
HIDE POOR SOULS AVALANCHE OPEN SEASON
ALONG FOREVER HOME DEVILS WAY FAULT
WORM BUFFET FORCE QUANGO CONSCIENCE FIVE SCREAM
FLYSWAT MILLBANK CATERWAUL PUBLIC JUNTA ROUND UP
REVENGE DOMESTIC PICKPOCKETS SMART CARD STRAFE
SHIT BLAME JITTERS SNAKE PIT PAYING ATTENTION

704250928502 STANLEY DONWOOD 704250928502

TEETERING ON THE EDGE OF MADNESS

The art of Radiohead has become an inseparable accompaniment to the actual music. From The Bends onwards, the man responsible has been the enigmatic and reclusive STANLEY DONWOOD. In a rare e-mail interview, he tells EMMA MORGAN how he and the band work together. In lower case.

Shall we start off by you telling me how you first got into graphic design?

i never got into graphic design it was a mistake i was trying to be a tree surgeon but i didnt get the job.

OK, so what is your work environment like? Do you carry a little book around with you to doodle in on the bus or do you set time aside and hide yourself away like Roald Dahl in his centrally-heated shed until the job's done?

mmm yes, a little book. many little books and big a4 ones too. that's the idea anyway. often its bits of paper. serviettes and rizlas. a shed too, but theres not any central heating. theres a little woodburner. in the morning: chop wood, light the stove, stare at a half-finished painting for a while. after a bit it gets warmer. lots of room for painting in there though, and i can make a lot of mess. i was in there for three months last autumn. kind of forgot how to conduct myself in company after that. when i went in it was sunny early september and the next thing i knew it was christmas. but the paintings were started in los angeles, which is about as different to a shed in the middle of nowhere as you can get.

"I LISTEN TO THE MUSIC A LOT. A VERY VERY VERY LOT. UNTIL ITS SQUIRTING OUT OF MY EYES."

By the paintings, are you referring to the artwork for Hail To The Thief?

yep there were 8 paintings for hail to the thief
all one and a half metres square . . . artex and acrylic and blackboard paint
also there were paintings for kid a and amnesiac . . . even bigger
too big for my little house

When and how did you first hook up with Radiohead, then?

me and radiohead?
oooooh well . . . back in the fogs of time . . .
i was a humble busking firebreather hitching around england. in oxford a band named 'on a friday' were after a support act down the pub. i was prevented from breathing fire that evening. health and safety regulations or something. fortunately so, as i was very drunk. the next thing i knew i was staying in a suite at the chateau marmont, sipping cosmopolitans and waiting for yet another limousine.
oh, the dreariness.

What is the creative process behind the design work for a new album and its associated singles - do you sit down with the band, or just listen to the music, or what?

i listen to the music a lot. a very very very lot. until its squirting out of my eyes. i havent listened to hail to the thief since xmas so itll be a bit of a surprise to hear the mastered version that thom and nigel did back in sunny californ eye ay.

What kind of timeline do you work to - you mentioned working in LA, so do you tend to go where the band are recording?

ha. my timeline is something that seems accommodating at the beginning and then ridiculously claustrophobic at the end. let me out. i will pop.
yes often i go to the recording sessions cos its good to get a sense of what the records going to be about. kid a took two years though. that was fucking mad.

What were the original design ideas/briefs and finished pieces for The Bends?

er filming stuff on a dodgy old video camera then refilming it off the telly. then plugging the extremely fucked up results into the staggeringly primitive computer we had at the time. and going into the hospital in oxford to make the cover. the afternoon of the deadline. i like that cover because he sort of looks like hes coming. or having his legs sawn off. there was no brief. luckily.

OK Computer?

uuuummmmmmm i dont remember very clearly but that was the summer of horrible rural murders. hammers and such. horrible. we were in the countryside in somerset in a haunted house full of photos of jane seymour. white is the colour of bleached bones. thom screaming in an outhouse into a mike. all these things conspired to make the ok computer artwork. there was no brief. luckily.

Kid A?

erm yes as i said before that was two years of teetering on the edge of madness. that was when we started painting these huge square canvases. i was very scared of the world then. still am i guess but ive got more relaxed. anyway that was bosnia/serbia war times. horrid great landscapes full of snow and blood and scrawled scratches and laments. rwanda. leave you have 24 hrs we will come for you and your family.
the one image that inspired all that was a photo in the paper of snow, bloodstained and bootprinted. oh and circuses. roll up roll up. greatest show on earth. there was no brief. luckily.

Amnesiac and I Might Be Wrong?

tokyo city. an old book written by a recluse hidden in a chest of drawers in a dusty never visited attic in a ghost town. the minotaur, roaming lost and unloved in a labyrinth beneath london, crying. i spent weeks wandering around london on foot with a 1911 guidebook. there was no brief. luckily.

Hail To The Thief?

well i nearly went badly wrong with that one. i had an idea about topiary and porn, and combing them. but then i went to LA and the colours of LA are red, green, blue, orange, and yellow. plus black and white. thats pretty much all the most advanced capitalist city uses to advertise and sell stuff. its very loud. so i bought tubs of the most vivid colours and painted sort of real estate painting. as if each inch of the canvas was worth money. all the pictures for hail to the thief are of cities. i got the maps off the net. london, grozny, baghdad. 8 cities. santa monica, manhattan, kabul. i must have left a suspicious trail for the net police. there was no brief. luckily.

Do you ever have to compromise on ideas for commercial purposes or are the band now powerful enough to get all submitted work approved?

little strategic compromises are unavoidable. but not really. i have to say that parlophone are most accommodating of my whims.

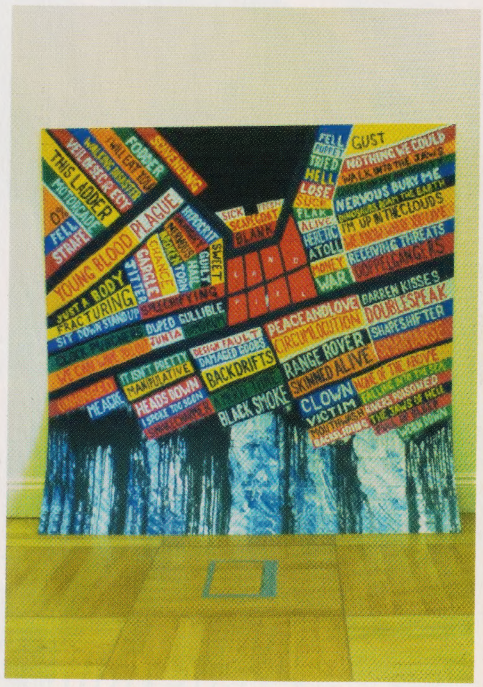
Whose design work do you admire and aspire towards?

i like jamie reid. i admire his ethic. and g who did crass's artwork. shes really really good.

Can you tell me more about your projects unassociated with Radiohead, eg your books, websites, other design work?

um yes. i did a pulp trash novel called catacombs of terror! and a book called slowly downward thats basically the stuff off my website of the same name. published by a bloke i met down the pub. im doing artwork for john matthias and mugison who are on matthew herberts accidental label. there is no brief. luckily. oh and the tshirt and program cover for glastonbury. there was no brief. luckily.

Finally, what are your future plans, now Hail To The Thief is out of the way?

im going to have a fucking rest.

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